

Commissioner Byrne welcomes adoption by the World Health Assembly of the world's first Convention on Tobacco Control

The World Health Assembly unanimously adopted in Geneva today a global Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner David Byrne welcomed the adoption as an historic moment and the first ever international treaty for public health. He said: "This is a ground breaking first and signals the commitment of governments all over the world to fight the tobacco scourge and protect their citizens from the worst excesses of a powerful global industry. Global problems, need global partnerships and local solutions. Armed with this convention we can move forward to make tobacco control a cornerstone of health and development. The Convention is testimony to the solidarity of an alliance of 192 countries who have decided to put the health of their citizens first. I would also like to congratulate Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland for the courageous leadership she has shown and the sterling work done by World Health Organization in taking the initiative to launch the process and in bringing the negotiations to a successful conclusion". The FCTC is a mixed convention which the Council signs for those subjects which fall under Community competence and which EU Member States sign for matters of national competence. The EU played a leading role in developing and promoting tobacco control policies within the Community and in the FCTC process. Commissioner Byrne's leadership, achievements and commitment in tobacco control have been recognised in particular with a special WHO award for him which was announced in the World Health Assembly when the Tobacco Convention was adopted. The now adopted Convention represents the outcome of three years of negotiation. Full details can be found at: <http://www.who.int/home-page>.

The objective of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is to protect present and future generations from the consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke. It provides a framework for tobacco control measures to be implemented by the Parties at national, regional and international levels. It's adoption represents a groundbreaking moment in global public health history. The WHO estimates that 4.9 million people died last year due to tobacco use and that without a co-ordinated international intervention, the number of deaths is projected to rise to 10 million per year by 2020. In the European Union alone, 500,000 deaths occur every year due to tobacco related diseases.

The convention deals with a wide range of tobacco control-related matters. Some of the key elements of the final text include:

- Advertising

Parties recognize that a comprehensive ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship would reduce the consumption of tobacco products. They agreed that each party shall, in accordance with its constitution or constitutional principles, undertake a comprehensive ban of all tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship.

- Labelling

The text requires that at least 30 per cent - but ideally 50 per cent or more - of the principal display areas on tobacco product packaging should be taken up by clear health warnings in the form of text, pictures or a combination of the two. Packaging and labelling requirements also prohibit misleading language that gives the false impression that the product is less harmful than others. This misleading language may include the use of terms such as “light”, “mild” or “low tar”.

- Taxes

The text formally recognises that tax and price measures are an important way of reducing tobacco consumption, in particular among young people, and requires signatories to consider public health objectives when implementing tax and price policies on tobacco products.

- Liability

Parties to the Convention are encouraged to consider taking legislative action, where necessary, to deal with criminal and civil liability, including compensation where appropriate.

- Financing

Parties are required to provide financial support for their national tobacco control programmes. In addition, the text encourages the use and promotion of existing development funding for tobacco control. The eventual need to enhance existing mechanisms or to set up other appropriate financial mechanisms to channel additional financial resources, which may include a voluntary global fund, should be assessed by the Conference of the Parties based on a review of the existing and potential sources and mechanisms of assistance and on an assessment of their adequacy.

- Illicit trade

The text recognises that the elimination of smuggling, illicit manufacturing and counterfeiting of tobacco products, including the development of an effective system for the tracking and tracing of such products, and the development and implementation of related national law are essential components of tobacco control, and requires the Parties to take appropriate measures in this regard.

The text also requires countries to promote treatment programmes to help people stop smoking and education to prevent people from starting, to prohibit sales of tobacco products to minors, and to limit public exposure to second-hand smoke.